Speech (As Delivered)

Tom Healy, Chairman

J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board

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"Not Saving the World, But Sharing It"

Hi. My name is Tom Healy. I am a writer. And I want to begin by telling you a true story - which is NOT something writers are necessarily known for doing.

Just before I flew down to Atlanta, a friend of mine sent me a document from the United States government's famous Center for Disease Control – the CDC - that's based right here in Atlanta.

Now this friend of mine is a bit of a hypochondriac, so I thought she was worried about me catching the flu or something. And sure enough she did send me some health guidelines.

On official government letterhead, they say "How to Survive the Zombie Apocalypse."

People! You may not have known this, but WELCOME TO THE ZOMBIE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD!

Atlanta has zombie film festivals, zombie parades, zombie haunted houses, zombie everything. "The Walking Dead" is filmed here.

If you see anyone around you who looks dead but is still walking, it's probably just an exhausted official from the State Department. But be on your guard. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now."

Again, my name is Tom Healy and I'm the chairman of the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board.

Now, I grew up a poor kid on a small farm and if we saw some car coming down our dirt road, stirring up dust and looking all official, and then someone got out and said, "Hello, I'm here from the board of this or that" -- we'd run for the hills.

Because you know they wanted something.

And true enough, I do want something. I want your stories.

Let me explain.

The Navaho say that it takes a thousand voices to tell a single story.

You are the voices of Fulbright. YOU are Fulbright's great story.

And there is a Russian proverb that says: If you don't know the trees you may be lost in the forest, but if you don't know the stories you may be lost in life.

Your stories are maps to keep us from getting too lost in the complexities and troubles our big, interconnected world is facing.

The great American poet Emily Dickinson said, "To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else."

And I know you have little extra time. But I want you to remember your Fulbright stories, cherish those stories, share those stories.

My twitter account is @tphealy and the Fulbright board is @FulbrightBoard. I want to hear a chorus of tweets. A chorus of your stories.

Let me tell you a story that was just shared with me today. It's about Rachel Smith of prestigious Spellman College right here in Atlanta. Where's Rachel?

Rachel studied African-American literature and graduated with honors. She was awarded a Gilman scholarship to Australia and a Fulbright teaching assistantship in Turkey. She's now studying journalism in Boston. And look out, Oprah, because Rachel has recently started her own show.

Rachel was describing the challenges of teaching English when she was in Turkey. It was hard. She doubted herself. You know that story. But being as smart and determined and as caring as she is, like all of you, she figured it out. She made things happen.

But she also said something that struck me. She said,

"You know, Fulbright is not about saving the world. It's about sharing the world."

Fulbright is Rachel's story threaded together with your stories from Afghanistan to Uzbekistan, from Udaipur to Atlanta. Your stories threaded together with thousands of other Fulbrighters and the literally millions of people all of you come to know.

Now about that board ... The Fulbright board is appointed by the President to oversee your program, to guide the policies that will take Fulbright into the 21st century. And we also have the job of answering that big question – yes or no - to the more than eight thousand Fulbright applicants each year.

You are here in Atlanta learning about American politics and elections. You are here learning about the

struggle for civil rights, the courage of leadership, the power of words, the possibility to overcome evil and ignorance, the power to do good.

Here in Atlanta, here in Black History month, here on the night before the fifth anniversary of Barack Obama's historic announcement on Feb 10th, 2007 that he was running for President of the United States ...

Here in this place -- and at all times -- we must remember the struggle for equality, we must remember the sacrifices of all the people who came before us, we must remember all the work ahead.

I say this because when the Fulbright Program was founded in 1947, no African Americans needed apply. Senator Fulbright himself was a segregationist from Arkansas. He lived to be 90 – but, he said it was never long enough for him to outlive the shame, the injustice, the deep scar on the American psyche, of our racist past.

And yet, we are all on the road to freedom. Fulbright is certainly on that road, including people from every walk of life – city, rural, poor, privileged, women and men of every race and belief, and physical challenge. It's the road to a better world.

And our way forward has been guided by so many, including Dr. King whose memorial you can walk

to from here. Including President Carter whose great library is hosting us tonight.

Do you know the only other city where you can make a short walk to see two Nobel Peace Prize medals? You can do it here in Atlanta with Dr. King and President Carter. And you can also do it in Johannesburg with Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela.

Speaking of Peace Prize winners, there's one in Washington, D.C. too. I said that tomorrow is the fifth anniversary of President Obama's announcement that he was running for President. I wonder if he's going to make a similar announcement this year.

What do you think?

That's tomorrow. But let me close with tonight.

Tonight is the birthday of one of the great writers of our time, one of the great daughters of the State of Georgia, Alice Walker.

Ms. Walker wrote something that could easily be guiding words for Fulbright:

"Look closely at the present you are making: it should look like the future you are dreaming."

Goodnight, Fulbrighters. Great work. And -

except for those zombies out there under tonight's full moon -- sweet dreams!